

Grief During the Holidays & Other Special Occasions

How to help yourself and those who are grieving



There are many valuable resources on how to approach grief during the holidays. One of the most comprehensive I have found is written by grief expert David Kessler and can be found on his website or by clicking [HERE](#).

What I can add is personal perspective and some unique solutions that have helped me – a mother who lost a young child and has walked with her family through five holiday seasons now.

I learn best through human stories, and so it is through my own story that I feel I can best share all that I've learned on this healing journey of mine.

This information is written with the holidays in mind but can certainly applied to any day of the year. After all, grief in its rawest form has no limits and while some days are harder than others, there are still no words to describe most of them . . .

If you have questions or would like additional recommendations, direct message @HealingwithNikki on Instagram.



The morning of my son's passing an inner voice told me, "Tell people what you need." Of course, I had no idea what I needed, but the voice continued, "This is not just about you."

I understood in that moment that people wanted to help me, they just didn't know how. I also recognized that I would have had no idea how to help someone in my position either. I immediately felt compassion for everyone involved.

I had been a very private person before that day, but also a resourceful one. Asking for help was not my jam. But that all changed when tragedy struck. I knew very quickly that I could not survive my circumstances without community support. So, I got honest with myself and others about what I needed. I opened myself up to other people's offers and ideas. And in the last five years I've gotten more proficient at saying YES instead of NO.

Without further ado, here are five things that I have learned about managing grief and persevering through it during the holidays.

Thank you for caring about your heart and the heart of others,



Nikki



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Lesson #1: Tell people what you need.

I quickly learned that I needed friends and family to talk about my son with me and to each other. (People tend to avoid the topic wanting to be respectful, but for me that was and still is even more painful.) I quickly learned that when I explained my position on this to friends and family, they were more than happy to comply.

Contrarily, when I needed friends to sit with me and say nothing, the right people showed up at the exact right time to take on this role. When I needed other friends to organize play groups for my younger son so he could play through his grief, the parents to which I turned were grateful to know how to help and took on this role for my family.

People really want to help. They often just don't know how. Eventually, my friends and family learned to ask, "What do you need in this moment" or "How can I help you today." Day by day, we figured it out together. And when I went dark and didn't respond, everyone understood that too. So, when it comes to the holidays, just be honest with yourself and others. What do you need? Then open-up and learn to receive.

Lesson #2: Understand that some people just can't "go there".

It became very clear to me early on in my grief that some people have the empathy gene, and some simply don't. While some of my closest friends showed up for me in ways I will never ever forget and went out of their way to support me in ways I didn't even know I needed, others simply couldn't. They didn't know how. They still don't.

At the same time, people I didn't even know regularly showed up offering to do what they could, and they have become like family to me ever since. I would often stare at them and wonder, "How do they know how to do this?"

Bottom line for the griever, it's easy to get angry at the friends who don't show up in the way we want them to, especially on the hardest days like holidays, but it's not especially helpful.

Sometimes it takes time for them to come around – or it takes us being honest with them about what we need and how they can help. Other times, they just aren't capable of going deep and getting that real. I have found it's best to appreciate those who are able to show up, and be grateful for the new relationships that the holidays the hardest days, like the holidays, can bring into our lives.



Lesson #3: Do New Things, Start New Rituals.

Two days after my son passed away it was my 48th birthday. Three weeks later, it was what would have been his 13th birthday. And a week after that was Mother's Day. It's an impossible month of heartache that I face every single year.

That very first Mother's Day, when grief was at its worst, my family went out to brunch with my stepson and his mother and stepfather. Combining families on Mother's Day was not something we had ever done before. Then we all went to an art exhibit and finished the day at a professional soccer match surrounded by 20,000 people, which was extremely difficult (and not something I recommend!) but was also something my older son would have loved to do. It wouldn't have mattered what we did, we simply planned activities that guaranteed we'd get through the day together. Every minute was worse than awful, BUT the day also marked the beginning of an annual Mother's Day ritual that also turned into a Christmas Eve ritual, both of which I now cherish and look forward to every year.

The truth is anything goes. One year my family ignored Mother's Day altogether. This past year, my family's [TM23 Foundation](#) hosted a youth soccer tournament for 250 children on Tommy's Field to share my son's spirit of play with others. Mother's Day is one of the hardest days for me. It's also very difficult for many other families, so I wanted to create an event that was joyful and might help other children and parents struggling to get through it. Serving them served me.

My point in all this is that it is quite liberating to learn that we can celebrate special occasions however we want. Rituals are wonderful, as are new experiences and the relationships they attract.

Lesson #4: Getting through the "Big Ones".

For me, major holidays include Thanksgiving and Christmas, and they are the hardest. For the first few years after my son passed away, it was easier for me and my family to be with friends on major holidays. I even told my parents and my brother's family that being together was too difficult because it only reminded me of who was missing. Fortunately, they didn't take it personally – they were patient and supportive – and they waited for me to tell them when I was ready to celebrate as one family again. It took a few years, but the day did come. Still, we did it differently, not recreating what was, but creating something new.

My priority on every holiday and special occasion is to do whatever is best for my younger son. It is from this perspective that I start to plan.

Lesson #4: Getting through the “Big Ones”. *continued*

One year that meant splitting up and allowing him to be with his own friends for Thanksgiving. Another year it meant bluntly asking other families with children my younger son’s age if we could possibly join their plans. We ended up receiving multiple offers and choosing the one that was most flexible in case we couldn’t get out of bed and wanted to cancel last minute. The friends who ended up hosting us that year were so warm and welcoming. They gave a thoughtful toast honoring our eldest son and made a collective prayer for our family.

That day was the beginning of me learning how to honor and remember while moving forward at the same time. The day also taught me to be more open and thoughtful about including others, instead of being exclusive and rigid about what the holidays should be.

Lesson #5: Host your own gathering.

This may seem counter-intuitive, but I have found real healing (and have created many great memories for my family) by hosting my own gatherings on special occasions and holidays.

Getting all the people I love together in my home simply fills me up. The act of preparing for the gathering is also distracting in a healthy way, I think. It gives me something to do that’s creative and community oriented, and it makes me feel a lot better than worrying about how I’m going to feel on a particular holiday or special occasion. I often host a Pre-New Year’s party to gather our community, which still includes many of my oldest son’s friends. Seeing us all laugh and smile together reminds me how far we have come together and that we will forever be bonded by heartbreak and love.



Nikki



PS: Please share this with anyone who could use a little extra love + support this holiday season!

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